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FILE ONLY

OPINION

'Quiet diplomacy' failed these seven

Just a month ago, our national temper was a white-hot anger — fury directed toward terrorists who had kidnapped 153 TWA passengers, murdered one of them, and held 39 others for 17 days.

Had you knocked on any door in the USA the day before the 39 were freed, you would have heard cries of outrage, threats of retaliation, demands to "do something."

In the days since, our passion has petered out. How could we forget so soon?

The answer says something about our people, our staying power, our news media — our government.

Before the TWA plane was hijacked, most of us didn't have a hint that seven other of our fellow citizens had been kidnapped and held for months in Lebanon.

William Buckley, a diplomat abducted in March 1984, already had been a captive longer than the 444 days the Iranian hostages were held. We weren't outraged about his plight. The Rev. Benjamin Weir, a Presbyterian minister, spent his 444th day in captivity just last week. Nobody was threatening to bomb Beirut over his capture.

Five others — Peter Kilburn, David Jacobson, and Tom Sutherland, all associated with American University in Beirut; the Rev. Lawrence Jenco, a Catholic priest; and Terry Anderson, AP Mid-East bureau chief — all had been in captivity when the plane was seized.

The seven had been in danger. And where were we? Ignorant. Insensitive. Uncaring. That's where.

There are those close to our government who argue that "quiet diplomacy" is the way to free these seven. They want to attract as little attention as possible to them. They warn families to remain silent. They contend that "public inattention" has compelling virtue.

Just keep it away from the news media, they argue. And they point to the case of David Dodge, former president of the American University released in 1982, as a case where quiet diplomacy worked. That was the last time.

Quiet diplomacy didn't free Jeremy Levin, the CNN correspondent who escaped Moslem kidnappers after long captivity. Nor Frank Regier, a university professor freed when Nabbi Berri's followers stormed a house where he was incarcerated by radical Moslems.

And where has quiet diplomacy gotten William Buckley? Or Benjamin Weir? Or the five others? Nowhere.

Sure, quiet diplomacy deserves a chance to work.

But when it fails — as it has failed these seven — there is no public awareness, no inclination for our media to tell the tragic story, no pressure to get our government to keep pushing, keep pressing for their freedom.

That is why it is good news that the families of "the forgotten seven" are going to Washington this week to call public attention to the sad plight of their loved ones.

So long as we rely on quiet diplomacy and even one of the seven remains in a Moslem prison, our government has failed. And so has our news media. And so have we all.